CONTRIBUTION OF THE DARBHANGA RAJ FAMILY TO THE NATIONAL MOVEMENT IN INDIA

By

Dr. Bimanbehari Majumdar

It is usually presumed that the zamindars and noblemen in British India were extremely servile to the Government and that they tried to perpetuate the foreign rule in our country. This presumption may be true regarding the general body of landlords, but the house of Darbhanga is a brilliant exception to this. The Bengali encyclopaedia, *Visvakosa*, published towards the close of the nineteenth century, writes under 'Darbhanga' that when Maharaja Maheshvar Singh breathed his last in 1860, the annual income of the Raj was sixteen lakhs of rupees, but the amount of debt outstanding against it was seventy lakhs of rupees. Lakshmesvar Singh, the eldest son of the deceased Maharaja, was then only four years old. The income of the Raj rose to twenty lakhs a year during the twelve years of administration under the Court of Wards and the debt was completely wiped out. C. E. Buckland has quoted a report which states that during the life time of Maharaja Lakshmesvar (1856-1898) "upwards of two crores of rupees were expended on various public objects, such as, famine relief, the construction of roads, contributions for the support of schools and dispensaries"[1]. This means that the Maharaja after attaining his majority spent nearly half the annual income of the Raj for nation-building purposes.

The Indian National Congress received most substantial contributions from the Maharaja. The attitude of the Government towards the Congress was friendly only during the first three years of its existence. But in 1888 Lord Dufferin complained that the Congress had circulated pamphlets in thousands making "the most libellous and calumnious accusations" against the Indian Government and the civil servants. He further stated that the Congressmen "neither represented the aristocratic sections of Indian society, nor are they in special contact or sympathy with the great masses of the population"[2]. Eminent administrators like Sir Auckland Colvin, the Lt. Governor of the then North-West

1. Bengal under the Lieutenant Governors, Vol. II, p. 1070.
2. Dufferin's Minute encl. to Pub. Des. from India No. 67, 6th Nov. 1888 quoted in Hira Lal Singh's Problems and Policies of the British India, p. 233.

Province (now U. P.), Sir George Chesney, a former Military Member of the Government of India and a host of I. C. S. men were dead against the Congress. To help the Congress in such an atmosphere of official hostility required great courage and greater love for the country. Maharaja Lakshmesvar displayed both these qualities in abundance when he openly associated himself with the Congress organisation.

Pandit Ayodhyanath as the Chairman of the Reception Committee of the Allahabad session of the Congress in 1888 declared that the officialdom of the NWP had put so many obstacles that but for the help of the Maharaja of Darbhanga it would have been impossible for him to provide a venue for the Congress. The Maharaja purchased the Lowther Castle and made it available for the use of the Congress session at Allahabad. In 1894 when the tenth session of the Congress was held at Madras, its Resolution No. XXII stated that a Deputation of the Congress should wait upon Lord Elgin and that in it Bengal and Bihar should be represented by "H. H. the Maharaja of Darbhanga, Sir Ramesh Chandra Mitra and Mr. W. C. Bonnerjee". This shows that there was no attempt to keep secret the close assosiation of the Maharaja with the Congress.

In 1899 Lord George Hamilton, the then Secretary of State for India, asked the Government of India to find out the names of those zamindars and noblemen who financed the Congress. The India Government entrusted the task to C. S. Bayley, I. C. S., who was the Superintendent for the suppression of *Thugee* and *Ḍakaiti*, though the supporters of the Congress did not certainly belong to any of these two categories of criminals. In course of his report dated the 18th June, 1899 he mentions "we have nothing to prove that the late Maharaja of Darbhanga contributed Rs. 10,000 a year, but it is certain that he did give away very large pecuniary assistance. In 1888 it was rumoured that he was to be nominated President of the Congress to be held at Allahabad and that he intended to contribute a large sum. In 1890 he and the Raja of Vizianagaram each subscribed Rs. 5,000 towards the cost of Babu Surendra Nath Banerji's deputation to lecture on behalf of the Congress.[3] In the same year he was said to have given Rs. 2,000 to Mr. W. C. Bonnerjee as his first instalment towards the expenses of the next Congress. In 1894 Babu Surendra Nath Banerji mentioned at a meeting

3. Surendranath Banerji asserts (A Nation in Making, p. 111) that the members of the Congress deputation of 1890 paid every farthing of their own expenses. The other member of the deputation were R. N. Mudholkar, W. C. Bonnerjee, Eardley Norton and A. O. Hume.

held on the 2nd February that in the previous year the Maharaja had contributed Rs. 2,000. In 1893 and 1895 an 'Indian Friend' who was supposed to be the Maharaja of Darbhanga, gave Rs. 15,000 to the Permanent fund of the Congress and Rs. 8,000 to the Special Fund for 'India' (a journal published from London)".[4] It may be mentioned in this connection that the above-mentioned report also states that in 1895 and again in 1896 Mr. Tata subscribed Rs. 500 only to the Congress Fund. The magnitude of the contribution of the Maharaja of Darbhanga will appear from the contrast to the size of the Industrial magnet's gift.

Bayley could not get any positive proof of the fact that the Maharaja of Darbhanga did really make the contributions to the Congress. But Dr. K. K. Datta has now produced the documentary evidence in the Report of the Regional Records Survey Committee, Bihar (1960-61). He has published 5 letters of A. O. Hume and 1 letter of W. C. Bonnerjee written to the Maharaja in the period between 8th December, 1891 and 28th June, 1895. In the letter dated 8th December, 1891, Hume writes "Will you please very kindly send me at your early convenience a cheque for the Rs. 10,000/- due for this year 1991 ?" In the same letter he requests the Maharaja to attend the forthcoming Congress (which was held at Nagpur) at least for one day especially because he had never seen any Congreess yet. Thus it becomes evident that the financial help which he gave was not actuated by any selfish motive, not even to gain applause in the open session of the Congress. In another letter, dated 3rd February, 1893, Hume drew a pathetic picture of the financial condition of the British Committee of the Indian National Congress, which had incurred a liability for Rs. 690 on account of the publication of "India", and wrote to the Maharaja: "Unless, therefore, you wish the whole thing to collapse, you will see to the remission at-once of at least £ 1000, of which £ 690 will serve to clear off old debts and £ 300 will keep the concern going until you send more. Roughly I estimate that, besides this £ 1000, £ 1400 more will be needed, at least to pay our way to the 31st December next." The appeal of Hume did not go in vain. From the letter of Hume, dated the 20th March, 1893, we learn that the Maharaja paid through Mr. W. C. Bonnerjee £ 611-0-7d, "the equivalent of your princely subscription of Rs. 10,000 for 1892". This contribution saved the very existence of the British Committee of the Congress, and also the prestige of the Indian National Congress. Hume

---

4 Hamilton Papers, D. 510/2, Vol. 14, pp. 63-67 quoted in the Evolution of India and Pakistan, Sel. Dec. p. 147 ed. by Prof. C. H. Philips.

gratefully writes: "I cannot tell you what a weight this has taken off our hearts, I mean Wedderburns and mine and how it has relieved us from the unpleasant remarks of some of the othe: English members of the Committee who did not relish having to pay the money that they guaranteed." The last word is in reference to the fact that four Englishmen had stood as guarantors for a loan of £ 800 from the National Provincial Bank of London.

The Maharaja played a very important role as a member of the Legislative Council of the Governor General. He was nominated to it in 1883 and took his seat for the first time on the 12th March, 1883. The only other Indian members of the Council present on that day were Syed Ahmad Khan, Raja Shiva Prasad, Durgacharan Law and Kristodas Pal. The Maharaja was then a young man of 27 only. He took a leading part in the discussions on the Bengal Tenancy Bill. He vehemently denounced the Rent Law.

But he showed much greater constructive statesmanship next year in the famous Ilbert Bill controversy. The Bill which the Law Member, Mr. Courtney Ilbert had originally introduced in 1883 had to be modified largely on account of the opposition of the members of European and Eurasian communities ln India. It was proposed to enable the European British subjects, who would be put on trial before a District Magistrate of the highest class, to claim a jury of which at least half the members might be Europeans or Americans. On the 25th January, 1884 the young Maharaja of Darbhanga moved an amendment to this motion claiming that the jury system should be extended to Indians too. He did not like that one section of Her Majesty's subjects should enjoy a special civic right, which would be denied to the Indians in general. In support of his amendment he adduced the argument that the Bill was originally introduced to amend the Criminal Procedure Code and no special mention had been made of European British subjects. But in the present form it was supposed to give to every European the right of trial by jury in almost every case. He, therefore said: "I wish that this right should be extended to Indian British subjects as well in all sessions cases". Mr. Hunter, however, raised a technical objection to the effect that the extension of trial by jury had been placed in the hands of local government and as such the amendment moved by the Maharaja of Darbhanga was out of place in the Supreme Legislative Council. To this argument Kristodas Pal replied that the Central Government was competent to extend jury trial to the whole country. He further pointed out that the British subjects' claim of being tried by jury had not

been considered necessary to refer to Local Governments for opinion. Amir Ali expressed his sympathy with the amendment moved by the Maharaja and said he would vote for it, but he requested the Maharaja not to press for it. At last the Maharaja was prevailed upon to withdraw it.[5]

It has been repeated *adnausium* that the nominated members of the Legislative Council in the period between 1862 and 1892 were mere dummies and that they supported whatever was proposed by the Government. The instance cited here shows that a nominated member, who was at the same time the greatest landholder in Eastern India, had the courage to claim absolute equality with the Europeans before the eye of law. The boldness and constructive statesmanship displayed by the Maharaja endeared him to all advanced political thinkers in India. This is why he found no difficulty in getting himself elected to the reformed Legislative Council of the Governor-General in August 1893 as the representative of the non-official members of the Bengal Legislative Council. For the first time the Indian Legislature got the right to discuss the Budget.

On the 10th March, 1894 the Tariff Duty Bill was being discussed in the Council. It was proposed to impose import duty on iron, coal and other commodities necessary for the manufacture of cloth in India but to exempt imported cotton goods from payment of any duty. Maharaja Sir Lakshmeshwar Singh of Darbhanga made a vigorous protest against the proposal and said: "The imposition on the taxpayers of India of a vast system of import duties, with the sole exemption of cotton goods, seems to me very much to resemble a performance of the play of Hamlet from which the part of Hamlet himself is altogether omitted. When import duties have been talked about, whether in the Hershell Committee or elsewhere, as a possible means of relief from our financial difficulties, it is absolutely undeniable that what has been meant primarily is an import duty on cotton goods". With bitter sarcasm he pointed out that the object of imposing import duty on the various raw or partly manufactured articles which where used for the manufacture of cloth in India was simply to protect the Lancashire Cotton industry against the competition of Indian cloth. With brutal frankness he said: "It is unnecessary to point out that this is a protective duty—protecting the mills of England against our own mills". Thus he expressed his solicitude for the interest of the Swadeshi cloth eleven years before the

5. Proceedings of the Supreme Legislature Council, 1884, p. 88.

rise of the Swadeshi movement on the wake of partition of Bengal. He also condemned the imposition of duty on kerosine oil on the ground that its incidence would fall heavily on the poor.[6]

There was an outbreak of communal riots in many parts of India in 1893-94. The Government of India, therefore, proposed to levy a punitive tax on certain sections of people in affected areas in their Bill to amend the Police Act in 1895. The Maharaja Bahadur objected to such a policy. He pointed out that section 15 of the Police Act of 1861 was merely preventive but it was now being made punitive. He opined that if the District Magistrates were given the right to redress, in some cases, what he conceived to have been a miscarriage of justice on the part of judicial authorities, the communal situation would deteriorate. He argued : "The apportionment of cost (of an additional police force) on a particular section, be they Hindus or be they Mohamedans, I care not, which, can only result in renewed embitterment between the two factions. The feud will be perpetuated, and a most unfortunate impression will be created that the head of the district is in sympathy with one faction to the exclusion and detriment of the other. Nor will its effects be less harmful in the case of agrarian disturbance". The arguments adduced by him might not appeal to every body but it is patent that being a Hindu of Hindus he was above all communal prejudices.

One of the most significant contributions of the Maharaja to the growth of nationalism in India was his speech in the Legislative Council of the Governor-General in 1898 on the Amendment of the Indian Penal Code regarding sedition. He proposed an amendment which purported to omit the words "brings or attempts to bring into hatred or contempt or" from the Bill. He argued that Sir James Stephen in enacting the Sedition Law of 1870 had provided good safeguards by making criminal intent and incitement to force as essential ingredients of sedition. But the proposed Bill sought to do away with all these. The Maharaja observed : "You have to produce only an unfriendly feeling against Government, however mild it may be, and you make yourself liable to be transported for life or at the very least imprisoned with hard labour". The burden of proving innocence was thrown on the prosecuted and the Maharaja pointed out that such a procedure was against all rules. He further showed that there was exceptionally strong public opinion against the Bill. "I think that it would be hardly possible to name any occasion upon which a legislative measure has met with so little approval and so

6. Ibid, 1894, p. 166,

much unfavourable criticism from the public. The advocates of the Calcutta Bar, the merchants of Calcutta as represented by the Chamber of Commerce, the large body of Europeans and Eurasians in the metropolis as represented by the European and Anglo-Indian Defence Association, the British Indian Association, the great body of educated Native opinion in the Bombay Presidency as voiced by the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha and the Presidency Association, the inhabitants of Madras, the Indian National Congress, composed of representatives from all parts of India—these form in themselves a sufficiently formidable body of opposition"[7].

P. Ananda Charlu, who was President of the Indian National Congress at Nagpur in 1891 and was now a member of the Supreme Legislative Council strongly supported the amendment moved by the Maharaja and said : "After the copious remarks contained in the Maharaja's excellent and exhaustive speech, I have little to add"[8]. As the Government members were all against the amendment it was put to vote and negatived. But the importance of the Maharaja's efforts to create a favourable atmosphere for the exercise of free criticism of government lay in strengthening the hands of the nationalists of India, who were then not very numerous.

The Maharaja tried to help the cause of nationalism not only in the economic and political fronts but also in the social front. He was the natural leader of the Hindu community of Mithila. As such he was expected to be very conservative in the matter of social reform. But he knew that some of the social customs of the Hindus, such as the *Garbhadhana* ceremony immediately after the first sign of puberty was a positive obstacle to the growth of a virile nation. He, therefore, supported the Age of Consent Bill in 1891. Lord Lansdowne in his speech on the Bill before the Supreme Legislative Council on the 19th March, 1891 said that the Bill had the support of men like "His Highness the Maharaja of Darbhanga", Raja Durga Charan Law, P. C. Mozoomdar and Dr. Rash Bihary Ghosh"[9].

In the nineteenth century there was no bar to the same person being a member of the Provincial and the Supreme Legislative Council at the same time. The Maharaja was a member of the Council of the

7. Ibid, 1898, p. 116.
8. Ibid, p. 129.
9. Ibid, Proceedings, 1891, April.

Lieutenant Governor of Bengal for four terms—1880, 1893, 1895 and 1897. During the last three of these terms he also represented the Bengal Legislative Council in the Governor-General's Legislative Council.

His younger brother Rameshwar Singh on whom was conferred the title of Raja in 1886 was also nominated to the Bengal Legislative Council in 1888. He took up the work seriously and we find him attending the Council on the 20th April, 11th May and 15th May, 1889, and on the 4th and the 15th January, 1st and 15th February and 13th December, 1890.

His illustrious son, Maharaja Sir Kameshwar Singh was a great sympathiser of National Movement. People who were intimate with Netaji Subhash Chandra Basu say that he contributed large amounts to Netaji through secret emissaries who visited him from time-to-time.
